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SIPDIS

PASS TO NEA/DAS CARPENTER, NEA/FO WALSH, NEA/PI SCHULZ

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/16/2015

TAGS: PREL TU KDEM

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR DAS CARPENTER'S VISIT TO ISTANBUL;
THE CHALLENGE OF GETTING THE TURKS TO UNDERSTAND BMENAI

(U) Classified by DCM Nancy McElroy, E.O. 12958, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The June 21-22 meeting in Istanbul focusing on the participation of women in public life, the first substantial Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) event, is an opportunity to underscore U.S. support for the initiative shown by co-sponsors Turkey, Italy and Yemen. The Turkish MFA and the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) have organized the conference and have a good grasp of BMENAI. However, the overwhelming majority of Turks does not. Conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation abound. When discussing BMENAI in Turkey, therefore, it is important to avoid landmines by not referring to Turkey as a "model" or "example" or as an "Islamic" or "Muslim" country; by not claiming that there is such a thing as "moderate Islam"; by not conflating Turks and Arabs; by stressing Turkey's role as a BMENAI partner, not a target; and by emphasizing BMENAI's core message of the need for locally-generated, rather than externally-imposed, reform. End summary.

Conspiracy Theories Abound

¶12. (C) Despite a broad USG public diplomacy campaign, the overwhelming majority of Turks, including members of Parliament and academics, has a tendentious view of BMENAI. Conspiracy theories abound:

-- Much of the public subscribes to an Islamist/leftist scenario that BMENAI is a plot for U.S. domination of the Middle East and its oil.

-- Turkish "secularists" advance another conspiracy theory that BMENAI is a successor U.S. plot to the "Green Belt" thesis, i.e., to convert Turkey by stealth into a "moderate Islamic" state that will serve as a "model" that the U.S. will "export" to other countries in the region. In a lucid explanation of BMENAI during an April 20 speech, CHOD Ozkok emphasized the error of considering Turkey either a "model" or an "Islamic state" or "Islamic country."

-- Concern lurks just under the surface that Turkey is a BMENAI "target." While we have managed to overcome this concern with our MFA colleagues, the Turkish "secularist" elite is sensitive about not being lumped together with target countries -- and they notice it when they are.

-- There is a widespread belief among Turks that rhetoric about democratization is code for imposing a political system by use of military force; many Turks, whether left-wing or Islamist-oriented, think the U.S. definitions of democracy and democratization inherently include dropping bombs and imposing a "Christian-based system"; Islamist-oriented Turks maintain that Islam is broader than democracy and that the U.S. has no business poking its nose into the "Muslim world."

Avoiding Landmines in Turkey

¶13. (C) To overcome this widespread ignorance and the grip of conspiracy theories, we have adopted the following approach in discussing BMENAI:

-- We avoid referring to Turkey as a "model" or even an "example." Instead we note that Turkey has recent experience in internally-generated reform, that a country's internally-generated reform is the heart of BMENAI, and that we understand Turkey is ready to share its reform experience with other countries.

-- We do not use the phrase "moderate Islam", which has evoked sharp rejoinders from Prime Minister Erdogan that there is no such thing as "moderate" Islam, there is only Islam. Erdogan and others do not shrink from charging that "non-Muslims"'s use of the adjective "moderate" is a patent attempt to interfere in another religion. These charges resonate deeply in the Turkish public. In short, the phrase

is radioactive in Turkey. Using it sets Muslims in Turkey against us.

-- When the subject of Islam arises, we say that interpretations of the meaning of Islam depend in the first instance on Muslims, and that what we look at is the way they live their religion.

-- We refrain from calling Turkey a "moderate Islamic country" or an "Islamic state" or "Islamic country" or even a "Muslim" country. Such references land us in the middle of a fierce internal Turkish debate about the role of Islam in Turkey. Instead, we stress that Turkey is a democratic, secular state with a majority-Muslim population.

-- We are careful to avoid conflating Turks and Arabs. Some in ruling AKP are very Arab-oriented (e.g., many from the political Islam school of former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, including FonMin Gul, who spent seven years at the Islamic Development Bank in Jiddah and has long followed a Saudi Sunni line in his approach to Islam). Some have deluded themselves into thinking that the part of the Arab world once under the Ottoman Empire is nostalgic for the Ottomans (e.g., Gul's ideological soulmate Ahmet Davutoglu, currently the chief foreign policy advisor in the Prime Ministry). However, the vast majority of Turks feel an antipathy towards Arabs, see their forms of Islam as different (in many cases more mystical), and strongly resent being treated as if they are in the same cultural basket.

-- To appeal to a Turkish audience, therefore, it is important to acknowledge that Turkey has a far different culture and history than the Arabs do. We thus stress Turkey's role as a BMENAI partner. Turkey's status as a DAD co-sponsor and organizer of the Istanbul conference illustrate this point.

-- We stress that BMENAI means U.S. support for locally-generated reforms, not imposition of a U.S. plan. While this is a staple of BMENAI philosophy, it is news to most Turks, and bears repeating.

EDELMAN